

CTC NEWSLETTER

How to Answer Questions About Your Weaknesses

By Arlene S. Hirsch, published in CareerJournal.com, reprinted here with permission of the Wall Street Journal

Every successful executive has weaknesses as well as strengths. The key is ensuring that your weaknesses don't become career-enders. Potential employers will try to discern your shortcomings to ensure they don't hamstring their company. Your challenge is to convince them that you don't bring lethal liabilities.

One way to learn a candidate's weaknesses is simply to ask directly during interviews, "What are your weaknesses?" While job hunters lament this question, employers are determined to continue asking it because the responses typically are so illuminating.

Seven Response Strategies

To make sure this question doesn't trip you up, here are possible strategies that you -- as an interviewee -- can use to frame an effective response. Remember that context is as important as content. Whenever you cite a weakness, be sure to remind employers of your strengths. Be honest about your shortcomings, but never cite anything that might genuinely interfere with your ability to do the available job -- and do it well. The

key is to present your weaknesses in a way that demonstrates your real strengths and character.

Strategy 1: Cite a weakness that, under the right circumstances, can prove to be an asset.

Conventional wisdom suggests that you respond by stating a weakness that really could be perceived as a positive, such as: "I'm a workaholic. I spend a lot of time at work making sure that I do my job right."

As you can probably guess, employers usually see right through this type of response because it's both dishonest and self-serving. A better answer is to mention something that may be perceived as a weakness but, in the proper context, constitutes a genuine strength. For example, empathy -- the ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings -- is a good quality when trying to understand an enemy. But an empathic manager may be viewed erroneously as "weak" or "soft." A candidate who offers empathy as a perceived weakness (but knows it's a strength) can then cite a time

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*Best Wishes
for a Safe
&
Happy
Holiday
Season
from the
CTC Staff*

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*"When I'm good I'm
very, very good, but
when I'm bad, I'm
better."*

- Mae West

when he or she used empathy to gain competitive intelligence.

The "strength as weakness" strategy works well if you: show the value of using the particular trait in a given context; demonstrate that you know how and when to use it most effectively; and explain how you might be able to use it to help your future employer.

Saying, for instance, that you're a perfectionist would work if you can cite times when this trait is a strength instead of a weakness. An example might be when proofreading or editing, since perfectionism can guarantee error-proof copy. On the other hand, a perfectionist chief executive officer might micromanage his top managers and paralyze the organization. Knowing the requirements of the job and the organizational culture can help you decide whether a potential employer will view your perceived weakness as a potential strength.

Strategy 2: Cite a corrected weakness.

Another strategy is to cite a weakness that you're working to correct. Always provide concrete examples of what you're doing to fix the problem, the progress that you've made, and how these improvements will help an employer.

An international executive felt his career had suffered because he wasn't fluent in Spanish. After losing a job during a corporate reorganization, he decided to combine work with pleasure by signing up for a language-immersion program in Chile. Six weeks later, he felt he had learned enough Spanish to be more effective in his next job. During one interview, he asked the interviewer if she would like to conduct the interview in Spanish so he could demonstrate his proficiency directly.

In another scenario, a marketing executive who had lacked expertise in customer-relationship management related how she had used her unemployment to take seminars and courses in the field and was eager to apply her new knowledge in her next job.

Strategy 3: Cite a lesson learned.

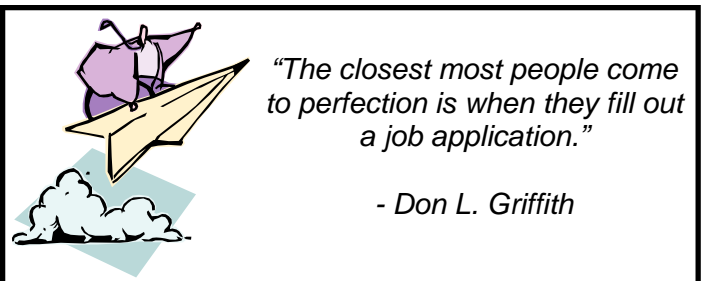
Similar to the corrected-weakness strategy, the lesson-learned approach acknowledges real missteps and mistakes within the context of a lesson learned. If you can demonstrate what you learned from your mistake, potential employers will be reassured of two things: first, that you can learn from your mistakes; and two, that you won't make this kind of mistake again. It's also smart to link how this newfound understanding will benefit a new employer.

An assistant manager who was having a personality conflict with her boss complained to her boss's boss about her manager. After that, she was demoted to a sales-clerk position. Reflecting on the experience, she could talk about the importance of "managing upward" and, with 20-20 hindsight, how she would handle the same problem now.

Strategy 4: Cite a learning objective.

After reviewing the job description, you may discover that part of the job requires more skill and experience than you now have. Rather than assuming the potential employer won't notice this weakness, develop a strategy to compensate for it.

For example, a candidate for an employee-benefits specialist position knew that she had experience in five of the six technical areas that the employer required. Before she interviewed, she researched certification programs that were available through professional groups. Her goal was to learn the language and expertise the skill required and also how long it would take her to get "up to speed" in that area. When she cited



this weakness, she could then address what she needed to do to learn it and in what time frame.

Strategy 5: Cite an unrelated skill deficit.

You may know of professional weaknesses or deficits that, while troubling, don't interfere with your ability to perform well in a specific job. The fact that you aren't a great public speaker won't hurt you much in an administrative role. Your less-than-perfect writing skills may not be a deal-killer if the job requires mostly telephone communication. Obviously, the key is knowing the job description and career path well enough to understand what's necessary to be successful. Clearly, you don't want to identify a weakness that would genuinely affect your ability to do the work.

Strategy 6: Deflect.

If you don't feel comfortable answering the question, you can try to deflect it by saying that, while you obviously have weaknesses, you aren't aware of anything that would interfere with your ability to do the job. If the interviewer persists, you can turn this into an opportunity to discuss what's important to you. You might say, for example, that you work best with managers who trust and give you a lot of feedback. Or you might say that you tend to perform best in a fast-paced environment with clear deadlines. Although you aren't specifically citing a weakness, you are implying that you work better under certain conditions.

You also can use humor to deflect the question, as demonstrated by one general manager. When asked about his weaknesses, he liked to reply: "Ask my parole officer." Of course, this joke works only if you don't have any felony convictions.

Strategy 7: Address the unspoken question.

Interviewers who ask the weakness question may be more interested in how you approach the question than in the specific weakness you

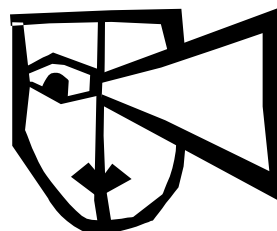
cite. If you want to have a more honest and direct conversation, you can begin by acknowledging the concern and asking if the interviewer is wondering if you're hiding a fatal flaw that should be uncovered. You also can review your qualifications and ask if there's a specific concern that you could address in greater depth. This allows you to tailor your responses to any potential reservations or resistance. It also levels the playing field by changing the dynamics of the interview.

Before using this strategy, assess whether you think the interviewer will respond well to your directness. While some might find it refreshing, being this direct may be intimidating to someone who prefers to hide behind an interviewing script.

Although there's a performance element to interviewing, you aren't an actor who needs to perform for an audience. You're engaged in a conversation designed to determine whether you can work together effectively. Towards that end, you can do your part to make the interviewer more of an active participant than a passive observer and critic of your performance.

In the end, it isn't your mistakes and weaknesses that matter most, it's whether you're aware of your weakness, understand its potential impact on others and are willing to work to improve yourself. Your ability to handle this question confidently and effectively can send a powerful message to potential employers about your real strengths.

-- Ms. Hirsch is a career counselor in Chicago, who has written several books on career issues, including *"How to Be Happy at Work"* (Jist Publishing, 2003).



*"The greatest of all faults,
I should say, is to be
conscious of none."*

- Thomas Carlyle

EDITOR'S NOTES

The following books have very good advice and guidance on interviewing:

Susan Bixler with Nancy Nix-Rice

The New Professional Image

The new edition of this classic shows how to tailor your appearance for success in today's workplace-from corporate casual to the ultimate power look. One of the few image books designed for both men and women.

Richard Fein

101 Dynamite Questions To Ask At Your Job Interview

Fein's book fills a gap in the job search literature, looking at the questions the applicants should ask at a job interview, rather than at the responses to questions posed by the interviewer.

Ron Fry

101 Great Answers to the Toughest Interview Questions

Another classic. Gives the reader a sense and examples of what types of responses employers are seeking when they ask the standard questions.

Arlene S. Hirsch

National Business Employment Weekly's Interviewing

This guide takes you step-by-step through the phases involved.

Caryl Rae Krannich and Ronald L. Krannich Interview For Success: A Practical Guide To Increasing Job Interviews, Offers and Salaries

Offers the reader just about everything to know about interviewing.

Camille Lavington with Stephanie Losee

You've Only Got Three Seconds

Here's the personal marketing book that shows what to do during those critical first three seconds when you walk through a door and extend your hand to someone for the first time.

JOB LEADS

ADST Interviewers Needed

The Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training is looking for additional interviewers to support the Iraq Experience Project and the Afghanistan Project (both funded by the U.S. Institute for Peace). They need people to interview recent returnees from Iraq and Afghanistan.

They pay \$150 per interview. The interviewer:

1. conducts the interview (average length one to two hours),
2. writes a brief (less than one page) executive summary of the interview, and
3. does a very light edit of the interview transcript.

Most of the interviews are in the metro DC area. Most are face-to-face, but some are by phone.

If you are interested, please contact:

Jack Zetkulic
Executive Director
ADST
703-302-6991
zetkulicjm@state.gov
jzetkulic@adst.org

(NOTE: Located in Building "I" on the FSI Campus -- so you can just drop by if you want!)

International Mission on Diplomacy

Faculty Advisor Position

The International Mission on Diplomacy is a pre-professional program for university students interested in furthering their career development in the field of diplomacy. This program provides participants the opportunity to examine career options in the field of international affairs, discuss current issues affecting the diplomatic com-

"The words 'I am ...' are potent words; be careful what you hitch them to. The thing you're claiming has a way of reaching back and claiming you."

- A.L. Kitselman

munity and explore the complexities of formulating national policy.

Throughout the program, participants are given the opportunity to visit diplomatic and governmental agencies and academic institutions. Students also take part in meetings with public officials, government leaders and policy analysts. The International Mission on Diplomacy is an educational, culturally enriching experience designed to add to each participant's personal growth, as well as academic and pre-professional profiles.

The faculty advisor will co-lead a group of approximately 80 university students through one of these experiential education programs. This individual will need to prepare the students for their experiences and meetings, conduct debriefing sessions, accompany the students to all of the events and manage the student group.

A professional background in international affairs or diplomacy is required and previous experience with university or high school students is strongly preferred. Lodging, airfare and meals will be provided.

Responsibilities Include:

- Working with the in-country operations and logistics team to ensure that the program runs smoothly
- Briefing and debriefing students for each day's activities through instructional sessions
- Facilitating group discussions and interactive student participation
- Accompanying the group on all scheduled activities including travel to and from the program country
- General supervision of students
- Preparing written evaluations of the program
- Attending a two-day mandatory training session in the Washington, D.C. area

Contact Information:

E-mail:

diplomacy-staff@internationalmissions.org

Web site:

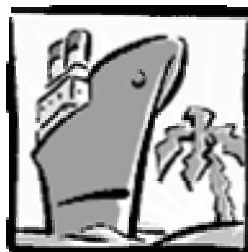
www.internationalmissions.org

Cruise lines

A few cruise lines need people who can lecture on special areas of expertise or for specific destinations. Some cruise lines ask the lecturer to pay a small amount per day plus tips as well as the transportation to the port of departure. In return, the lecturer gets the cruise for "free" and, perhaps, the option of bringing along a spouse or friend.

One of these companies is Sixth Star. You can review their advertisements for "Special Interest" and "Destination" speakers on their website, www.sixthstar.com. Here is an excerpt:

"From art history to zoology and everything in between, Sixth Star provides speakers on just about any subject, including hot news buttons of the day. Special Interest Speakers should discuss their area of expertise in a fun, educating and entertaining manner. The door is wide-open when it comes to this position as numerous fields of study would be applicable. In the past, we have placed experts in opera, theater, cooking, wine, art, movies, astronomy, shipwrecks, lighthouses, animals, finance, etc. The Special Interest Speaker provides a series of original presentations that would be of interest to the cruise guests. ... During a typical week at sea, Speakers traditionally deliver three to four 35-minute presentations, with 10 minutes at the end for questions and answers. Presentations should be very entertaining (or as we like to say, "edutainment"), and we highly encourage the use of professional presentation tools, including slides and Power Point presentations. The Special Interest Speaker must be an excellent and experienced public speaker as typical audience size ranges from 50-300 passengers for each talk. However, good news travels fast aboard ships and excellent Speakers have been known to pack the house!"



"So much of who we are is where we have been."

- William Langewiesche

ATTENTION JSP GRADS!

Job Fairs

The companies attending our October job fair included the following:

Access Systems, Inc.
Alphainsight
Bilingual Temps, LLC
Casals & Associates, Inc.
Chemonics International
Chugach Systems Integration, LLC
Creative Associates International, Inc.
Geneva Software, Inc.
Global Professional Solutions, Inc.
Harlan Lee & Associates
Home Depot
International Executive Service Corps
International Resources Group – IRG
Louis Berger Group, Inc.
Management Systems International (MSI)
ManTech International Corporation
Mary Kay, Inc.
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)

Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC)
PADCO Inc.
Raytheon Company
Senior Employment Resources
SRA International, Inc.
Strategic Staffing, Inc.
U.S. Peace Corps
United Nations Employment & Assistance Unit,
IO/S/EA

Our next job fair will be held on March 29, 2005.

Appeal for Guidance

Please let Amy know of any professional organizations for security professionals or for public affairs professionals. She is trying to develop a list of job search resources for those 2 groups and could use your help. You can contact her at pittsa@state.gov.

*"You're always a little disappointing in person
because you can't be the edited essence of yourself."*

- Mel Brooks



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